Political Language in Texts of Boko Haram

Theophilus Abbah
PhD candidate in Department of English & Literary Studies University of Abuja

Email: theoabbah@gmail.com
08033895294.

Political language in texts of Boko Haram

Abstract

The leaders of Boko Haram, the late Muhammad Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau, employed political rhetoric in their sermons and speeches in line with the tradition of leaders of Al-Qaeda and other forerunners of Jihadism. Applying the theory of semantic fields, this paper presents a lexical semantic analysis of texts of Boko Haram and compares them with those of other Jihadists. The texts used are multiple transcripts from video messages of the leaders of Boko Haram, beginning with those of Muhammad Yusuf, even before the sect became violent, up to and including Abubakar Shekau's speeches as at 2015. This investigation has discovered that politics is ingrained in the rhetoric of the sect's leaders in spite of the fact that they claim to oppose Western democracy. Instead of using political rhetoric to struggle from political power, the sect uses political language to incite their followers against politicians, irrespective of their religious affiliation, and political leadership in Nigeria and in other parts of the world. This work recommends that Islamic religious leaders and teachers should counter the hate-filled political language of Boko Haram by providing the contextual and correct interpretation of scriptures used by the sect to control the minds of their followers.

1.1 Introduction:

The Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Waj-Jihad, an Arabic name that is translated into English Language as "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad," is a Nigeria-based Islamic terrorist group, nicknamed Boko Haram. The sect was founded in 2002 by the late Sheikh Muhammad Yusuf. For the seven years before his assassination by security forces on July 30, 2009, the sect's leader sermonized in rhetoric that converted thousands of the young and old in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa and several towns and cities in Northern Nigeria. The sect had members and sympathisers in other West and Central African countries like Chad, Cameroon and Niger Republic. [1]

In their various sermons, Muhammad Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau, the prominent leaders of the sect claimed to abhor politics, especially Western democracy. However, their

---

[1] Abbah is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Literary Studies at the University of Abuja, Nigeria. Email: theoabbah@gmail.com. Twitter: @theophilusa Blog: www.theinsight.com.ng Mobile: 08033895294

statements contain copious direct references and allusions to local and international politics. Also, the sect is named in political conflicts in the country copiously. First is the series of legal cases arising from the suspicion that some Nigerians are members or sponsors of the Boko Haram. In September 2012, a serving lawmaker in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Senator Ali Ndume, was arrested, detained and arraigned before a Federal High Court in Abuja on an allegation that he sponsored the militant sect. He hails from Gwoza, a stronghold of the sect, and belonged to a presidential committee set up to investigate the root causes and proffer solution to the Boko Haram menace.

The allegation against Senator Ndume was based on a text message sent to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Federation, Mohammed Adoke, by a suspected Boko Haram member. In the text, the sender threatened to kill Adoke, if the minister didn't take a particular political decision as AGF. Several questions arise from the case. The Islamic sect claims to oppose politics and democracy. How could they be responsible for a text threatening the life of the AGF if he didn't take a particular political decision? How does the language of the text relate to other text messages sent out by Senator Ndume? How can the court of law be sure that the accuser of Senator Ndume is saying the truth, or is indeed a Boko Haram member? How political is Boko Haram? To answer these questions, the paper will make recourse to the texts of the leaders of Boko Haram to analyse their linguistic features that relate to politics and provide contextual interpretations of how they have used the devices.

1.2 Approach to the Paper:

In linguistics, semantic fields, according to Lehrer, is a categorization developed by J.Trier and W.Porzig, which established that words that belong to the same thematic groups are joined together by common contextual associations, such that lexemes that belong to different parts of speech can come under the same sematic fields. He quotes them as giving the example of the semantic field of 'tree' which brings together 'grow' (verb), 'green' (colour) and 'leaf' (noun). It is also in line with Lehrer's argument that

> A situation is commonly found in which a word covers a group of meanings that are obviously related. The set of meanings covers a wide range, so that one central or basic term may be related to a large number of derived or secondary ones, but the derived ones have nothing in common" (8).

He gives the example of the lexical item "hot" which semantically refers to temperature, but could be related to diverse senses, like 'angry', 'sexually aroused', 'radioactive,' and even 'fresh' (like a hot news item). These lexical items belong to different word-classes. In this investigation, lexical items that belong to different parts of speech but have a meeting point in a common semantic field are categorized based on their thematic features.

This paper examines words and graphic units in Yusuf and Shekau's texts that belong to the same bracket of political language though they may belong to different parts of speech. The prominence of these words will be examined and their political implications are pointed out. Essentially, this paper will be based on translated versions of video and press releases made from the code-mixing communication rendered in Hausa, Kanuri, Arabic, and English languages. The paper has to rely on expert translators who are well versed in English, Hausa and Arabic in order to arrive at a reliable and standard translation of the texts. The translators are Aminu Abubakar, a journalist with Agence France Presse (AFP), a France-based news agency. Aminu, a 1993 graduate of Journalism from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, studied Arabic and Hausa from Qur'anic to secondary schools. He reported for Radio France International (RFI) in Hausa for many years before he joined AFP in 2000. Over the years, agents of Boko Haram sent videos of Abubakar Shekau's pronouncements to Malam Abubakar, and after he had translated and done stories from it, other news organizations in Nigeria followed up the stories. He is adjudged to be a very good translator, such that an AFP journalist, Mike Smith, depended on Abubakar's expertise to write his book entitled *Boko Haram* in 2015.

The primary sources of data for this paper are transcripts of video tapes, press releases, published press interviews granted by the late Muhammad Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau and published newspaper reports based on statements by Boko Haram. The research uses the transcripts as the basis for carrying out stylistic and quantitative analyses involved in the paper. The samples are as follows:

(1) Two samples (transcripts) from the preaching by the late Muhammad Yusuf in the days before the sect turned violent will be used for the analysis. It is expected that a stylistic analysis of the messages will expose, not only the idiolect of Mohammed Yusuf, but also the semantic fields from which his rhetoric were derived and the overriding themes of the sect. Also, the samples will reveal the level of the sect's departure from the language of

mainstream Islam and its level of convergence with other Jihadist movements in other parts of the world.

(2) Two press interviews granted by Mohammed Yusuf prior to the beginning of the violent conflict between the sect and security agencies. The material will expose his sophisticated use of language, his rhetoric, if there is any shift in the theme of his brand of Islam, and the overriding discourse topics.

(3) This paper examines press statements issued by the recognized spokesman of the sect, Abu Qaqa, to elicit the sociolect and the social power structure of the sect. It will also help to discover if there is any shift in the language of the sect.

(4) In the course of this paper, transcripts of two videos of Sheikh Abubakar Shekau will be examined. One of those videos will be those before the purported death of the sect's leader and one other after his purported death. The objective of examining the videos is to elicit the lexical semantic features and rhetorical devices of the actors in the video in order to discover similarities and divergences.

(5) Apart from the selected transcripts (1 to 4), this paper will do a cross-referencing, using several other transcripts of statements by the late Muhammad Yusuf, Abubakar Shekau, Abu Qaqa, Osama bin Laden of Al-Qaeda, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of ISIS, the Taliban in Afghanistan or al-Shabaab of Somalia, to compare their linguistic features with the transcripts mentioned in 1 to 4.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses will be used to elicit the linguistic features in the corpus selected for this paper.

(i)   Quantitative Analysis:

The spread of word classes in the texts will be revealed in tables and bar charts. The word classes to be examined include nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, connectives, determiners, and exclamation marks. Tables will show the distributions of the types of the word classes, and, in the context of word classes, show the relative degrees of preponderance of the various word classes.

Also the prominent semantic fields will be identified and lexemes distributed among them to show the relative degree of prominence in both known and disputed texts being examined. Tables and graphs will be used to show how these are distributed in the texts.

In carrying out the rhetorical analysis, the paper will look at the distribution of various rhetorical structures, linguistic devices, targeted audiences and imitative textual allusions to scriptures and ideologies in known and disputed texts.

(ii)　　- Qualitative Analysis:

From the tables and graphs, the paper will provide explanations on the implications of the preponderances of word classes; their semantic implications; the degree of consistency in a speaker's choice of words, and rhetorical devices, which can be compared with those of other speakers being examined in this paper. This paper shall examine the lexical semantic fields, rather than registers,　that are significant in the pronouncements of Boko Haram leaders and those of other Jihadist groups

1.3 Theoretical Framework: Political Language:

Paul Chilton aptly describes politics as a struggle for power. He says: "On the one hand, politics is viewed as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert their power and those who seek to resist it. On the other hand, politics is viewed as cooperation, as the practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty and the like" (3).

Though inherently a militant religious sect, Boko Haram's opposition to Western democracy and all that it constitutes has dragged it into power struggle in Nigeria and beyond. This is evident in the lexemes from the semantic field of politics which are abundant in the transcripts of the sect's leaders' statements and sermons. Ruth Wodak says language has been an integral part of politics that linguists have advanced the need to found a genre of linguistics called politico-linguistics to account for all discourses on politics. Though this has not been achieved, Wodak quotes Burkhardt as proposing the concept of 'political language' to take care of "all types of public, institutional and private talks on political talks, all types of texts typical of politics as well as the use of lexical and stylistic linguistic instruments characterizing talks about political contexts. Since then diverse kinds of research works into the discourses in political language have been carried out (584).

Thorne says the lexemes of political language are normally subject-specific and abstract nouns being common in discourses that are theoretical in nature (102). She says they are replete with naming of politicians, role titles in addition to names, the diverse concepts are elaborated with further use of lexis that elaborate the implications of such concept or what Thorne refers to as the secondary meanings of the ideas.

Wodak says discourses on the lexical semantic fields of political language are derived from six fields, among them lawmaking political procedures; formation of public opinion and

5

self-presentation; party-internal development of an informed opinion; political advertising, marketing and propaganda; political executive and administration; political control. In these categories fall diverse forms of text materials, among them laws, bills, amendments, speeches and contributions by members of parliament, press releases, press conferences, interviews, books and political articles; party programmes, declarations and statements; election programmes, slogans, speeches, posters, election brochures; decisions (approval/rejection)inaugural speeches, coalition papers, speeches of ministers/heads of governmental institutions; declarations of opposition parties, parliamentary questions, speeches of MPs, petitions for a referendum, and even press releases of the opposition parties (586).

1.4 Analysis: Language of politics in Boko Haram texts:

[3]COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PREDOMINANT LEXICAL FIELDS OF FOUR TEXTS:– 2 EACH OF MUHAMMAD YUSUF AND ABUBAKAR SHEKAU								
Lexical Fields	Y 1 1,075	%/cw 448	Y2 1,329	%/cw 400	S1 1,759	%/ cw 93 3	S2 1,270	%/cw 322
POLITICS								
Nouns								
Proper	06		09		21		07	
Common	07		12		08		07	
Abstract -			09		19		09	
Verbs								
Lexical -			04		07		14(37)	11.4 %
Infinitive -			-		06			
Adjectives	(13)	3%	02 (36)	9%	07(68)	7.2 %		

In the transcripts of Yusuf and Shekau analysed in this paper, lexemes that belong to the semantic field of politics, similar to those from the genre of violent opposition, are significant and play crucial roles in the discourse of terrorism involving Boko Haram. In Y1, out of the 448 content words, there are 13 lexical items (proper and common nouns) from the semantic field of politics, representing 3% of the content words. But in Y2, the rate rises to 9% of the total content word of 400. There are 36 lexical items spread as follows: proper

nouns (09), common nouns (12); abstract nouns (09); lexical verbs (04) and adjectives (02). However, the trend changes in the transcripts of Shekau's statements under paper. In S1, there are 68 lexical items from 933 content words, translating to 7.2% of the total number of words. The lexical categories are spread as follows: proper nouns (21); common nouns (08); abstract nouns (19); lexical verbs (07) infinitive verbs (06) and adjectives (07). In S2, the percentage of lexemes from the semantic field of politics rises to 11.4% out of a total of 322 words. It is spread as follows: proper nouns (07); common nouns (07) abstract nouns (09) and lexical verbs (14), making a total of 37 lexical items.

The political atmosphere in Y1 is brought alive with the introduction of a proper noun, made up of the name and title/position of Governor Ali Modu Sheriff on Page 2 line 17, where Yusuf accuses "the leadership of Ali Modu Sheriff, the governor of Borno State" of being the architect of the brutal murder of some members of the sect. Subsequently, he varies the proper noun referring to the governor with the proper noun referring to the state – Borno -which appears two more times in the text. In Y1, the sect's conflict with another political institution (also a state government) extends beyond the borders of Borno, to some 500 kilometres in Bauchi State. The proper noun referring to this North-East state features in Y1 as a reference to a similar conflict between Boko Haram and constituted authorities. The proper noun appears twice in this transcript, where Yusuf says in line 11, page 4 that "I will never give up myself, not after 37 of my followers are killed in Bauchi."

But the face-off between the sect and these political personalities is intensified by his use of the common noun 'leaders' and its abstract noun variant 'leadership' six times in Y1. For instance, in line 9 of page 2 he urges his followers to "Remove the leaders of unbelievers because they are not trustworthy". On line 13 of page 1, he uses the same common noun to whip up sentiment for himself by saying, "One day you will see your 'leader' placed on the table being tortured." These sentences throw up the political power struggle embedded in the religious campaign of the sect. Indeed, Yusuf is caught attacking a system of government, and calling for the abrogation of 'democracy' an abstract noun from the genre of political communication. Yusuf says here, "Democracy and the current system of education must be changed otherwise this war that is yet to start would continue from now on…"(line 15, page 4).

In Y2, the use of multiple proper nouns from the field of politics intensifies as Yusuf directs his venoms at 'this government' (two times); 'Nigeria' (2 times), 'President Yar'adua',

'Governor Sheriff', 'Inspector General of Police', 'Kano (State)' , 'Zamfara State', 'North'. On page 4, line 4 of Y2, he takes on the institutions of government and questions the use of force by the military against Boko Haram members. He says, "soldiers came back and cocked their rifles under President Yar'adua, Inspector General of Police and Governor Sheriff." The extension of the action of the military to higher authorities, even to the point of accusing the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, not only the Commissioner of Police in Borno State, demonstrates his disdain for the political authorities in Nigeria. Yusuf's advocacy for the implementation of a stringent Sharia Law in Nigeria explains his opposition to the democratic system.

Shekau follows the tradition of taking on political institutions and leadership to such an extent that proper nouns referring to persons holding political power are replete in the transcripts of his video outings. The proper noun 'Nigeria' is mentioned 7 times in S1, 'President' is mentioned 5 times, and 'Jonathan', a proper noun referring to Nigeria's former president when Shekau made the speech, appears 5 times. The proper noun referring to the successor of Ali Modu Sheriff as governor of Borno State is not missed out in Sekau's rhetoric. He refers to 'Governor Kashim Shettima' once, and denounced 'Senator Mohammed Ali Ndume', the lawmaker representing Borno South Senatorial District in the Upper Chamber of the National Assembly. Another proper noun in the transcript points to 'Barrister Tanimu Turaki,' a former Minister of Special Duties under President Jonathan who was chairman of the Presidential Committee on Insecurity in the North-East. The committee was tasked with the responsibility of working out a peace deal, and ultimately, an amnesty for repentant Boko Haram members.

Denouncing these political leaders in S1, Shekau urges his men to "harvest Jonathan's neck, harvest Kashim's neck" on page 2 line 5. He lambasts the senator, a Muslim, saying "…Ndume… are all infidels,' (line 3 of page 5) and speaks dismissively of the presidential committee, by saying "Taminu Turaki said he is representing mediation, enter our hand and see mediation. All of them are infidels." (line 5 of page 5). His attitude to the leadership in Nigeria is made manifest in the choice of lexemes from the semantic field of politics, such that his audience is made to discount the constituted authority by implying that such authorities are powerless. He says, "There is no President in Nigeria. No President in Nigeria. No President in the world, only Islam," on lines 34 and 35 of page 3. It is not only current political figures in Nigeria that Shekau refers to in his tirade using lexemes from the semantic field of politics. He tags previous leaders like 'Aminu Kano' and 'Tafawa Balewa' as Muslim

apostates, adding that the only former leader he and his sect recognize from among past leaders of Nigeria was 'Ottoman Dan Fodio', the leader of the Jihad against monarchs in pre-colonial Nigeria in the early 19th Century and founder of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Like Yusuf, in S1, Shekau takes a swipe on the system of government in contemporary Nigeria by referring to the abstract noun, 'democracy' 7 times, and saying it cannot help the country. He also rubbishes another common noun 'constitution' which is the cornerstone of contemporary Nigeria political experience. In lines 16 and 17 of Page 5, he says: "This is a war against Christians and democracy and their constitution, Allah says we should finish them when we get them." Though they claim to hate politics, their decision to destroy 'democracy' and the 'constitution' puts them in the frame of a deadly opposition to the political system in Nigeria.

He does not forsake this trend, as in S2, a video released six months after S1, Shekau still takes on the polity, making copious references to proper nouns as 'president', 'Nigeria', 'Senator Mohammed Ali Ndume', 'Solomon Dalung', 'country', 'Abdullahi Wase', all of them political institutions and figures in Nigeria. He does not fail to refer to the noun 'constitution' 4 times , denouncing it and painting it as ungodly. Shekau speaks further about another common noun with meaning from the semantic field of politics 'law', or 'books' as being useless and irrelevant to the Muslim world. In lines 14, 15, 16 on Page 1 of S2, he speaks in an invocative but mocking manner against the constitution and law of Nigeria thus: "Oh you followers of 'constitution', have you forgotten your 'laws'? Since the time we were preaching in Maiduguri, in your 'constitution' in Section 8, verse (paragraph) 2 to 3, in your accursed 'book' called 'Constitution', which became law for those who are not fair to themselves on earth..."

An indication that the sect members choose their lexemes from the semantic field of politics as a deliberate strategy is evident in the fact that the sect's erstwhile spokesman Abu Qaqa regularly makes political statements. For instance, in a telephone conference with journalists in Maiduguri in March 2012, he lambasts 'government', a common noun from the semantic field of politics, as being made up of unbelievers, and asks Muslims to engage in a power struggle against the system. He says, "We are certain we will dismantle this government and establish Islamic government in Nigeria." Here Qaqa talks about the common noun 'government' twice and another proper noun 'Nigeria' once. The three lexical items are from the field of politics. He says further, "As far as we are concerned, we know

that the 'federal government' will not live up to its responsibility.' In the same breath he chooses two political lexemes 'federal' and 'government.' In an email to journalists in June, 2012 after killing a former DIG of police, the sect says, "By God's grace very soon top 'government officials' will not have peace as we will intensify attacks on them wherever they are." In another statement that same month, Qaqa chooses a political lexeme in a sense very similar to that of Shekau by saying "The 'Nigerian state' and Christians are our enemies and we will be launching attacks on the 'Nigerian state'…" In the sect's statement before the January 2012 deadly attacks in Kano, the group warns the political leadership of the state in the persons of 'Dr Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso, Governor of Kano State,' and goes on to talk about 'Nigerian government' two times; 'late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua,' the late political leader of Nigeria; 'Borno State' and several other institutions of the state.

As indicated so far, Boko Haram's argument against the political system in Nigeria is a throwback to the ideas propounded in the 20th Century by the ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood, one of them Sayyid Qutb. This scholar, in his book, *Milestone Along the Road*, had reasoned that any political system that is not an offshoot of the Islamic faith should be destroyed. He writes thus:

> Other societies do not give it (Islam) any opportunity to organize its followers according to its method, and hence it is the duty of Islam to annihilate all such systems, as they are obstacles in the way of universal freedom. Only in this manner can the way of life be wholly dedicated to God (137).

The leader of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, in his concept of Vilayat-I faqih in his book *Islam and Revolution* says the systems of government and lawmaking by man is a wasted effort because Islam has a ready-made legislative and governance systems in place. He says:

> The entire system of government and administration, together with the necessary laws, lies ready for you. If the administration of the country calls for taxes, Islam has made the necessary provision; and if laws are needed, Islam has established them all. There is no need for you after establishing a government to sit down and draw up laws, or, like rulers who worship foreigners and are infatuated with the West, run after others to borrow their laws. Everything is ready and waiting. All that remains is to draw up ministerial programmes, and that can be accomplished with the help and cooperation of consultants and advisers who are experts in different fields, gathered together in a consultative assembly…"(137-138)

Another author, Mawdudi, in his book, *Jihad in Islam* writes that

> Islam wishes to destroy all States and Governments anywhere on the face of the earth which are opposed to the ideology and programme of Islam regardless of the country or the Nation which it rules (9).

The Al-Qaeda, led by the late Osama bin Laden, in its Letter to America in 2002 raises the same banner saying,

> Under your [the United States'] supervision, consent and orders, the governments of our countries which act as your agents attack us on a daily basis; these governments prevent us from establishing the Islamic sharia…We call upon you to end your support of the corrupt leaders in our countries. Do not interfere in our politics and method of education. Leave us alone, or else expect us in New York and Washington (5).

The vision of all Jihadi groups, among them Boko Haram, is principally the establishment of an Islamic State, which would bring all Muslims under the caliphate. The caliphate would then be used to submit the rest of the world to Islamic authority. It is not a surprise that in its lust for political power, Shekau declared an Islamic Caliphate on August 24, 2014 after seizing Gwoza town in Borno State. Amnesty International Report in 2015 exposed life in the caliphate throughout the period of the ill-fated regime. Shekau invoked the Shariah law in the territory, collecting taxes, holding court and altering the lifestyles of the people by forbidding them from listening to music, engaging in sports, alcoholism, and taking male and female (sex) slaves.

1.5 Conclusion:

In the texts of Yusuf and Shekau, there are many lexemes from the semantic field of politics, mainly from proper, common and abstract nouns [names of political figures, systems of government, and names of political entities, etc]. When they used these lexical items, it was to oppose the governments of Nigeria, both at state and federal levels, and the authorities of other Western countries. Though the sect claims to be religious, its choice of words is related to those of opposition groups, as the sect calls for a violent overthrow of the democratic system, to be replaced by a Caliphate. Both Yusuf and Shekau show disdain for the existing political arrangements in Nigeria, and openly call for the annihilation of political leaders who are aligned to the West. The sect's anti-establishment posture is opposed by prominent mainstream Islamic scholars who do not subscribe to Boko Haram's argument that Western democracy is sinful, and those elected into political offices under the system are

'infidels.' Over the years, the sect had been opposed by Sheikhs and scholars who disagree with Boko Haram and some of them were suspected to have been killed by the sect.

It is apparent, however, that government has not invested enough resources in educating potential followers of Boko Haram that politics is not evil and that Muslims who participate in political activities are not infidels. The sect had thrived on its rhetoric against political leaders by branding them as corrupt and being anti-people. There is the need for religious leaders and government at all levels to launch a campaign that will counter this point of view, especially in rural areas in the North-East where Boko Haram has been entrenched and indoctrinated thousands of the young and old into submission. Without a deliberate government policy to counter Boko Haram's anti-politics rhetoric, the sect leaders will replicate themselves in millions of other gullible Muslims who may turn out to be future Boko Haram leaders and members.

Works Cited:

Adrienne Lehrer. *Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure*. North-Holland Publishing Company. 1974: pp1 – 10.

Paul Chilton. *Analysing Political Discourse*. Routledge Raylor & Francis Group. London. 2004: pp 4.

Qutb Sayyid. *Milestones Along the Road*. Markazi Muktaba Islam. Delhi. 1954: pp 137

Ruholla Khomeini and Hamid Algal. *Islam and Revolution.Writing and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*. Mizan Press. Berkeley. 1981
Saeed, I. John. Semantics. Blackwell Publishing. Australia. 2006.

Sayyid , A Maududi. *Jihad in Islam*. Islamic Publications. Lahore. Pakistan. http://www.islamicwatch.org/text/Maududi, June 2017.
Wodak, R & de Collin R. Politics and Language: Overview in Keith Brown. *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics*. Second Edition. Vol. 7 . 707 – 719. Oxford